

## TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM AND WORLD POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

Transnational activism has become increasingly salient dynamics of world politics in several issue areas including human rights, environment, development, women's rights, and peace. The article first assesses how major International Relations theories look at them. While realist theories do not take them seriously, constructivism and sociological institutionalism underline the fact that transnational actors can matter in world politics. An important component of this study is that it assesses when, how, and under what conditions transnational actors can matter in international relations. Finally, the study examines areas in which transnational actors pose challenges for state-centric Westphalian international system while suggesting that they also suffer from notable limitations. In the end, the article calls for the existence of opportunities for further research.

**Keywords:** Transnational Activism, International Relations Theories, Norms, Transnational Social Movements, Domestic-International Linkages.

**JEL Classification:** F50, F51, F53

## ULUSAŐIRI EYLEMCİLİK VE KÜRESEL SİYASET

### ÖZ

Uluslararası eylemcilik son dönem dünya siyasetinin birçok alanında (insan hakları, çevre, kadın hakları, kalkınma ve barış vb.) giderek ivme kazanan bir dinamik haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma öncelikle belli başlı uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinin uluslararası eylemciliğe nasıl baktığını değerlendirmektedir. Realist teoriler bu aktörlerin etkinliği konusuna şüphe ile yaklaşırken inşacı ve sosyolojik kurumsalcı yaklaşımlar uluslararası aktörlerin dünya siyasetinde etkin bir rol alabileceklerine destek vermektedirler. Makalenin önemli kısmını uluslararası aktörlerin ne zaman, nasıl ve hangi koşullarda uluslararası ilişkilerin kayda değer bir unsuru olabileceklerine dair olan tartışma oluşturmaktadır. Çalışma, uluslararası aktörlerin devlet merkezli Vestfalyan uluslararası sisteme meydan okuduklarını belirtirken bu aktörlerin aynı zamanda önemli eksiklikler içerdiğini iddia etmektedir. Nihai olarak çalışma, uluslararası eylemcilik/aktör konusunun uluslararası ilişkiler araştırmacıları için önemli fırsatlar sunduğunu savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Uluslararası Eylemcilik, Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorileri, Normlar, Uluslararası Sosyal Hareketler, İç-Dış Siyaset Bağlantıları

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## 1. Introduction

Transnational activism has become increasingly salient dynamics of world politics in recent decades. Thousands of transnational actors -advocacy networks, social movements, non-governmental organizations and other activists- work for various causes regarding human rights, environment, women's rights, development, peace and etc. Overall, transnational activism challenges the fundamental characteristic of the modern nation-state system: sovereignty. As a result, the increasing quantity of transnational activism has led to controversies in the field of international relations (IR) theories. While realist theories look them skeptically, neoliberal institutionalism gives them some role in world politics. Constructivism takes them seriously as carriers of norms and challengers of state sovereignty. It also greets them being source of change in world politics.

This paper examines IR theories in regard to transnational actors. The major debate revolves around whether transnational actors matter in world politics. After a brief assessment of transnational activism in historical perspective, the paper compares four major theories of IR on the basis of their basic premises as well as assumptions about transnational actors. Then, a major question for the recent studies on this subject will be examined: when, how, and under what conditions transnational activists can be successful in their goals, which requires changing the behavior of states and international institutions in favor of their principled beliefs. To have a thorough analysis of transnational activism, the following section will touch on the power and limits of transnational actors. Finally, a conclusion will follow.

## 2. Transnational Activism in Historical Perspective

Although transnational actors have increasingly become more salient players of world politics in recent decades, they are not totally new. The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights (1839), the International Working Men Association (1864), the World Christian Temperance Union (1883), and the World Zionist Organization (1897) can be noted as major NGOs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sikkink and Smith 2002: 25). Far ahead of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one can note the Reformation, the voyages of discovery and the conquest of the Americas as the earlier cases of transnational activity. In addition, nationalist and fascist movements in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries may be considered in this category (Halliday 2001: 27-28). However, the existence of historical precursors should not lead one to ignore the substantial changes in the transnational activity, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, in recent decades. While the number of NGOs in 1909 was only 176, it increased to 832 in 1951, 1255 in 1960, 2173 in 1972, 4518 in 1988, and to around 5000 in the mid-1990s. Moreover, the number of transnational social movement organizations increased from 183 in 1973, to 319 in 1983, and to 959 in the year 2000. Hence, a substantial increase in the quantity of NGOs occurred in the past three decades (Risse-Kappen 1995, Smith and Bandy 2005). In this regard,

Sikkink and Smith note that sixty percent of NGOs, active in 1993, formed after 1970. Therefore, transnational actors are not new to world politics but their numbers have substantially increased only in the past few decades.

### 3. Transnational Actors and Theories of International Relations

How do international relations (IR) theories assess the role of transnational actors in world politics? Here, four major theories of IR will be discussed: classical realism, neo-realism, neo-liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Overall, realist and constructivist theories dissent on whether transnational actors matter in world politics. Neo-liberal institutionalism takes place between these two positions.

Classical realism, represented primarily by Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau can be defined through the following assumptions. First, human nature is broadly conflictual; man is prone to conflict by nature. Such an understanding of human nature leads realist scholars to have a 'pessimistic' view of society and politics. For Hobbes, life is 'nasty, brutish and short' in the absence of a central authority, *Leviathan*. Second, domestic and international politics are a struggle of power (Morgenthau 1950). According to Thucydides, 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. So, power plays a key role in domestic and international politics. Third, state is the central actor in international politics. For Hobbes, state is the major source of security. According to Machiavelli, state interests define morality not vice versa. Fourth, interests not ideas, morality or law define state behavior and international outcomes such as war and international cooperation. For Morgenthau, national interest is the central factor for state behavior and international politics. E.H. Carr criticizes the liberal notion of 'harmony of interests', and argues that the clash of interests among states is a major feature of international politics.<sup>1</sup> Finally, anarchy, the absence of central authority, creates a high degree of insecurity in international politics.

Neorealism or structural realism has both similarities and differences with classical realism. Neorealism agrees with classical realists regarding the central importance of power and interests in international politics. It has also the state-centric view. However, neorealism comes up with a system-level explanation. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of neorealism, criticizes inside-out explanations of international politics that take domestic-level factors into considerations to explain state behavior and international outcomes. In contrast to *Man, the State and War* (1959), which includes individual, domestic and international level explanations for the origins of wars ('three images of war'), Waltz's later book, *Theory of International Politics* (1979) generates a system level theory of international politics. Waltz's theory is composed of three elements. First, (ordering principle) domestic politics is hierarchical while the international politics has an anarchic

<sup>1</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, Thucydides, "the Melian Dialogue" in the *History of Peloponnesian War*; Machiavelli, *The Prince*; E.H.Carr, *The Twentieth Century Crisis, 1919-1939*

order. So, domestic and international politics are radically different. Second, international political structure is composed of functionally similar units, states. Third, states are functionally similar but they differ in terms of capabilities. As a consequence of his three-leg model, Waltz argues that variation in capabilities across states (especially, military capabilities) is the only source of change in international outcomes. Waltz's theory has a state-centric view of international politics. In addition, it assumes that states are unitary actors, which are primarily concerned with survival in the anarchic self-help world. The bottom line of Waltz's neorealism is that international system (not individual or domestic-level factors) determines state behavior and international outcomes.

Despite the fact that classical realism and neo-realism differ in the primary causes of conflict in international politics (human nature versus the anarchic international system), they share two major assumptions: (1) states are the central actors (2) power, interests, and military force matter more in international politics than ideas, norms, and ideology. In the light of such a theoretical framework, neither classical realism nor neo-realism gives any considerable role to transnational non-state actors. They rarely expect that a transnational actor, be a NGO, a transnational social movement or a transnational advocacy network, can change the behavior of states. Therefore, a case of transnational activism that shapes state interests or change state behavior should be considered as an anomaly for realist theories.

Neo-liberal institutionalist theory of international relations agrees to the basic realist assumption: states are the central actors of world politics. However, the theory differs from the realist theories in several ways: (1) states are the central actors but international institutions and non-state actors are also important (2) international institutions can create cooperation among states (3) transnational relations, multinational corporations and interdependence has become important dynamics of world politics in recent decades (Keohane and Nye 1971, Keohane and Nye 1977). Overall, neo-liberal institutionalism is a less state-centric theory vis-à-vis realist theories, and gives some role to transnational relations. However, it focuses more on multinational corporations and international institutions rather than on transnational activists/transnational social movements. The theory assigns a complementary role to transnational actors vis-à-vis states to enhance international cooperation. However, it does not much expect that a transnational activist campaign can alter the behavior of states or shape state interests.

Constructivism has increasingly become a powerful voice in the IR field, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Finnemore, Wendt, Ruggie, and Katzenstein may be cited as major constructivist scholars.<sup>1</sup> These scholars criticize realist theories on several grounds. They problematize realist assumption of 'national interests', and explain the origins of 'national interests' through norms,

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<sup>1</sup> Finnemore 1996, Wendt 1992, 1998, Katzenstein et al 1996, Ruggie 1998

identities, ideas and culture. Second, constructivism comes up with different ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations. Criticizing the realist ontology of materialism, epistemology of positivism and methodology of deductive/generalizable theory formation, they offer social/ideational ontology (norms, identities, ideas i.e.), non-positivist epistemology and inductive theories. Particularly important, constructivists along with critical theories of IR emphasize human consciousness and agency in international politics. Therefore, constructivist assumptions pose a sharp contrast to the realist focus on state and conflictual/pessimistic conception of international politics. For constructivism, conflict and cooperation are both possible. In addition, individuals, social movements, and international organizations can also be significant agents of change in international politics. Last but not least, constructivism takes transnational actors seriously as the maker of norms and the agents of change in world politics.

In recent years, constructivist scholars have produced several studies dealing with norms and transnational activism. For example, Martha Finnemore argues that the International Red Cross as an international NGO played a primary role in the creation of Geneva Convention on the use of force. The convention, which includes humanitarian norms of war making, has succeeded to limit the behavior of nation-states (1996: 70-73). In other seminal study, Audie Klotz argues that transnational anti-apartheid activists have achieved to generate great power sanctions against South Africa. Particularly important, Klotz contends that this case represents a great example to the fact that norms, independent of material considerations, can be important factor in shaping state behavior (Klotz 1995, 1999, 2002). Keck and Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders* is also a major study among the recent constructivist studies on norms and transnational activism. Keck and Sikkink's study includes three successful campaigns of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) in the areas of human rights, environment, and women's rights. Overall, these scholars argue that transnational activism can change the behavior of nation-states, and can pose a challenge against state sovereignty.

Realist theories, neo-liberal institutionalism and constructivism offer different perspectives on world politics. Realist theories keep the nation-states as the central actors, and assign no role for transnational actors. Neo-liberal institutionalism gives transnational actors some role but it is not interested in normative dynamics. Constructivism, on the other hand, takes norms and transnational activism seriously. It argues that 'national interest' is socially constructed, and that both norms and transnational activism can shape the construction of 'national interest'. It also takes transnational activists as significant agents of change in world politics.

#### 4. When, How, Under What Conditions Do Transnational Actors Matter?

A critical part of the literature on transnational actors is the specification of mechanisms that transnational actors matter in world politics. The literature discusses a variety of explanations to understand when and how transnational actors can shape the behavior of states and international institutions.

Della Porta and Tarrow discuss several dynamics that have facilitated 'transnational collective action' in recent years.<sup>1</sup> First, the end of the Cold War has eased Western European support for NGOs in the East & Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Second, the authors suggest that the development of electronic communications, the spread of cheap international travel, and the massive increase in migration flows across borders have facilitated transnational activists to communicate with each other and to perform transnational campaigns (Della Porta & Tarrow 2005: 7-10, Moghadam 2009: 99-104). On this issue, Josselin & Wallace 2001's discussion of non-state actors is also very helpful. For these scholars, the relaxation of the Cold War tensions, the growth of affluence in Western liberal democracies, and the rising levels of education have been essential for the growing autonomous civic actions in domestic and international politics (2001: 7). The diffusion of English language across countries is also considered as a facilitating factor for transnational activism (Tarrow 2005). All these dynamics have provided more favorable conditions for the existence of transnational activism in the current area of globalization and international politics. That remarks that transnational activists may have distinct favorable/unfavorable conditions in different temporal contexts.

Social movement theory comes up with two essential concepts to understand the dynamics of collective action: *framing* and *political opportunity structure*. Framing refers to the construction of meanings and symbols in a certain interpretive way for the mobilization of social contention (Tarrow 1994: 119). An essential dimension of framing is that meanings are not given but socially constructed. For Tarrow, the images of 'martyred Polish' and 'suffering proletariats' led to the rise of Solidarity movement (p.131-33). Furthermore, transnational activism, transnational activists frame norms of human rights, women's rights, racial equality, and sustainable development to press states and international institutions to conform them. Therefore, framing is an important source of power for transnational activists (Tarrow 2005, Keck and Sikkink 1998).

'Political opportunity structure' is other important concept in the social movement literature to explain the sources of collective action. Tarrow defines 'political opportunity structure' as "consistent dimensions of the political

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<sup>1</sup> They define transnational collective action as follows: "coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions" (Della Porta & Tarrow 2005: 7).

environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action". (p.18) Therefore, a favorable political opportunity structure increases the degree to which a social movement can be successful. The major dimensions of opportunity structure are as follow: (i) opening up access to participation (ii) shifts in political alignments (iii) availability of influential allies (iv) cleavages within and among allies, and (v) state's capacity/will to repress social movement (p.85-92).

Although Tarrow's concept of political opportunity structure in *Power in Movement* can be helpful to understand the incentive dynamics for a domestic social movement, it largely misses transnational social movements. In *The New Transnational Activism*, Tarrow acknowledges this limitation, and he offers six processes of transnational contention: *global framing* ('the mobilization of international symbols to frame domestic conflicts'), *internalization* ('response to foreign or international pressures within domestic politics'), *diffusion* ('transfer of claims from one site to another'), *scale shift* ('coordination of collective action at a different level'), *externalization* ('vertical projection of domestic claims onto international institutions or foreign actors'), and *transnational coalition formation* ('horizontal formation of common networks among actors from different countries with similar claims') (2005: 32-34). Tarrow's later book nicely complements his earlier one with incorporation of new concepts to understand transnational collective action.

The sixth process of transnational contention, discussed in the *New Transnational Activism*, 'transnational coalition formation' finds a great echo in the international relations literature. A major insight of this process is its combination of domestic and international levels of analysis. In this regard, one cannot afford to ignore Kathryn Sikkink's model of 'dynamic multilevel governance'. An essential feature of this model is the examination of opportunity structure at both domestic and international levels. The model offers four types of transnational collective action on the basis of closed or open domestic & international opportunity structures. The following table clarifies the model:

Dynamic Multilevel Governance (Sikkink 2005)		International Opportunity Structure	
		Closed	Open
Domestic Opportunity Structure	Closed	Diminished chances of activism	Boomerang pattern
	Open	Democratic deficit-defensive transnationalism	Insider/outsider coalition model

The model provides a comprehensive analysis of transnational activism. The level of success for a transnational activity depends on the nature of opportunity structure at both domestic and international levels. For example, a transnational action working in open domestic and open international opportunity structure is more likely to be successful than the one that works in closed open and international structure. As an example, one can consider the relative difficulty to lead a human

rights campaign in Cavusesku's Romania in the lack of a powerful international support (closed regime, closed international opportunity structure). In contrast, 'boomerang pattern' and 'insider-outside coalition model' offer more chances of success for transnational activism.

A seminal example for the 'boomerang pattern' is transnational human rights campaign against the Pinochet regime in Chile. Beginning with the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, the Chilean human rights activists and victims of the Pinochet regime called for support from international human rights activists and foreign governments. When domestic opportunity structure was closed under the Pinochet regime, their call for international support resulted in the arrest of Pinochet in London in 1998. As a result of huge support from human rights activists in Spain, the UK arrested him, and on the basis of Torture Convention, extradited Pinochet to Spain for trial. Such an outcome would have been unlikely to happen in the absence of transnational coalition between the Chilean and international human rights activists. On the domestic side, Chile had strong human rights norms in the democratic period before the 1973 military coup. On the international side, European Social Democrats, the Catholic Church, U.S. Congress, and particularly the Spanish human rights activists were very helpful for the Chilean activists (Hawkins 2002: 50-62). This case provides a nice example to the power of transnational activism in world politics.

The case of India's Narmada Valley Dams is an example to the insider/outsider coalition model. Indian environmental activists along with local population of the Narmada Valley area successfully worked with the international community in order to prevent the construction of three thousands dams in the Narmada Valley. The project required the displacement of millions of people and the devastation of hundred of thousands of hectares of forest lands. As a result, its realization would have resulted in a huge social and environmental problem (Khagram 2002: 206). India's democratic regime allowed the existence of strong grassroots social movement, and the access to domestic decision-making institutions. However, Indian grassroots social movement initially failed to change the government position regarding the Sardar Sarover Project (SSP), which is a part of the Narmada project. When domestic-based movement failed in their attempts, then they performed two transnational coalition campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the transnational campaigns achieved the goal: the World Bank withdrew its support for the project in 1993, and in 1995 the India's Supreme Court ordered a halt on the realization of Sardar Sarover Project due to the social and environmental concerns (Khagram 2002: 226-227).

The Indian and Chilean cases are major examples to the insider/outsider coalition type of 'dynamic multilevel governance' model, formulated by Kathryn Sikkink. The IR literature also offers some other theoretical frameworks to tackle with the question that under what conditions transnational actors matter in world politics. Of those theoretical frameworks, Thomas Risse-Kappen's 'domestic

structures' model is very helpful. This model assumes that transnational actors matter; however, their impact is mediated through domestic structures. The argument relates to an important part of the field of IR: the domestic-international interactions. Risse-Kappen's concept of domestic structures incorporates three elements: state structure (centralized versus fragmented), society structure (weak versus strong), and policy networks (consensual versus polarized). For example, Japan with its centralized state structure, consensual policy network, and strong society structure has a different domestic structure from the United States, which has a fragmented policy network. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had state-controlled political institutions (Risse-Kappen 1995: 23). The implication of such a variation at domestic level is that transnational activists need to employ different strategies to have an access to the political systems of their target state.

The concepts of framing, opportunity structure, dynamic multilevel governance and domestic structures are major contributions from the fields of sociology and international relations to understand when, how, and under what conditions transnational actors (transnational social movements, transnational advocacy networks and international NGOs) can be successful to change the behavior of states and international institutions. Moreover, one also should underline the fact that the degree to which transnational activists achieve their goals varies across states, international institutions, issue areas, regional contexts, and over time. Domestic structures and the domestic-international interactions, discussed so far, mostly deal with the variation across states. States with different domestic structures (authoritarian versus democratic system i.e) provide different opportunities and constrains for transnational activists. Moreover, the type of international institutions may also matter for transnational activism. For example, the United Nations is more open institutions to the NGO impact than the International Monetary Fund. The UN has a body of consultative institutional structure while the IMF is based on elitist decision-making structure. Furthermore, international institutions concerning human rights such as the Amnesty International are more open to transnational activity than international trade institutions such as the World Trade Organization. Therefore, the exposure of international institutions to transnational actors varies across issue areas; human rights are far easier area for the transnational impact than monetary and trade issues. In addition, regional institutions in Europe are generally more open to transnational activity than Asian institutions (Sikkink 2002). Overall, recognizing all those variations provide a more sophisticated understanding of transnational activism in world politics.

### **5.The Power and Limits of Transnational Activism**

Framing is an important source of power for transnational activists. It also relates to norm literature in the field of international relations. Framing and norms direct us major assets of transnational actors: principled beliefs, legitimacy, and morality. These elements rarely take place in the neo-realist and neo-liberal theories of international relations. As suggested earlier, neo-realism takes states as the major

actors of international relations, and gives priority to military force or hard power. Neo-liberal institutionalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of international institutions in addition to the nation-states. However, both approaches miss 'soft power' that morality, norms and legitimacy generate in world politics. Transnational activists with their 'soft power' challenge the military and economic power of states and international financial institutions. The Chilean and Indian success stories, discussed earlier, demonstrate that transnational activists can have power to change the behavior of states and international institutions (the Indian government, the British government, and the World Bank i.e.). The key part of their success deals with their promotion of norms (human rights, environment, development etc).

Information is also an important source of power for transnational activists. Reports and documentation of human rights violations provide an important power to human rights NGOs. The Transparency International (TI) has become a well-known and influential NGO in recent years with its ability to rate countries on the basis of corruption information. The TI case shows that ideational resources and information can make a NGO visible and influential actor in world politics despite the fact that it lacks organizational and material power (Risse 2002: 267-268). Epistemic communities and policy think tanks also have such an ideational power with their expertise knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Framing, norms, and information can be taken as major sources of power for transnational activism. The existence of various successful transnational activism cases demonstrates that transnational actors including transnational social movements can play an important role in world politics. However, one should not miss the fact that transnational activism has also significant limitations.

First of all, not all cases of transnational activism end with success stories; there are also many failure cases. For example, transnational human rights coalition between the Chilean and international human rights activists succeeded to bring Pinochet in the front of the Spanish national court in 1999. However, the Chilean human rights activists were not successful to end the Pinochet regime. Despite the fact that, there was human rights activism in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Pinochet rule continued until 1990. For this reason, the Chilean case may be considered as a partial success.

Second, transnational actors are not always independent from state power. They may also be instrument of states to influence other states' domestic and foreign policies. For example, one can note the existence of several democracy promotion institutions, funded by the US government, to influence domestic structures of authoritarian regimes. William Robinson argues that the Reagan administration used the National Endowment for Democracy to establish polyarchic regimes in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Coleman 2001

Philippines and Nicaragua in the 1980s in order to maintain American interests in these countries (Robinson 1996).

Third, transnational actors may also embrace important problems in their organizations. In this regard, one can ask whether they are democratic, representative and accountable organizations (Sikkink 2002: 311-316, Dryzek 2012: 106-109). Transnational activists may question the elitist decision-making structures of international financial institutions as well as the authoritarian practices of states for the sake of transparency and democracy. However, they may also suffer from similar problems. For this reason, issues like representativeness and accountability provide important challenges for transnational NGOs and other transnational activists.

### **6. Conclusion**

This foregoing analysis is aimed at offering a balanced perspective on the growing transnational activism in world politics. For this purpose, a brief history is provided, perspectives of different IR theories are examined, major dynamics of transnational activity are presented, and the power and limits of transnational actors are discussed. On the basis of earlier discussion, the paper concludes with a number of arguments. First, realist theories and neoliberal institutionalism suffer from several weaknesses to deal with transnational actors; constructivism provides better theoretical and analytical insights. Second, empirical studies and mechanisms of influence show that transnational actors matter in world politics; however, the success is not guaranteed, the impact vary across time, issue area, countries, and depending on some intervening variables such as the domestic-international coalitions and domestic structures. Third, transnational actors pose an important challenge to the state-centric theories of IR. Four, transnational actors have important elements of power such as principled beliefs and information; however, their power is not unlimited. Moreover, they have to deal with basic challenges like accountability and representativeness. Last but not least, the growing literature on transnational actors/transnational activism in recent years provides ample opportunities of research for students of sociology, political science and international relations.

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